The Murder House

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The Murder House

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Summary

Willy Graham and his frenemy visit a haunted house.

Written for Hannictober, October 17th prompt: Haunted House

Notes

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What're you...a scaredy baby?"

Willy Graham scowls at his best and only friend. "I'm not a baby! Let's see you go in then!"

It's Halloween Eve, and the nine year olds are across the street from The Murder House; the most haunted spot in the whole county. Still dressed in costumes from their class party, the boy's shiver in the wind; the low-slung afternoon sun barely has strength enough to warm the air.

"You know my dad'll skin me alive if I'm late!"

Willy Graham snorts scornfully and bites a huge section off a licorice whip; feeling like a cowboy with a plug of chaw, he shoves it into his cheek " You'ns always use that excuse! Admit it! Yur too scared!"

Now it's Lauren "Lawman" Turner's turn to scowl. "M'not!"

"Y'ar!"

"M'not!"

"Y'ar!"

Lawman's face flushes. "If you feel that way, then I'm through with you!"

Willy nearly chokes on his licorice tobacco. The boy's, both new in school are pals of convenience, rather than compatibility.

They stare at one another, already missing the other's camaraderie. As always, Willy is the first to proffer the olive branch. "Awww...don' git yur britches in a knot...who cares 'bout this dumb ol' house!"

Feeling ornery, Lawman stares scornfully at the smaller boy. "Yur sayin' that cuz yur scared!"

Willy bites his lip. He's an only child while Lauren has a passel of siblings to play and go trick or treating with; Willy needs Lawman more than Lawman needs Willy and they both know it.

Lawman's lumpish face looks smug. "Hmmmph! Well? Is you or ain't you?"

"M'not!"

"Prove it!"

Willy's stomach drops. "How?"

"Tomorrow night. After we trick or treat. You go in fur five minutes 'n prove yur not yella."

"Dat's not fair! What 'bout you!"

"In my church, we put rattlers in our mouths...I ain't scared a' nothin'!"

Willy knows this to be a fact. He's heard the grown-ups gossip about the Turner's backwoodsy brand of Pentecostalism; he shivers involuntarily. "Well...spooks ain't the same."

"Says you, cuz yur scared!"

Will looks across the street. The small clapboard home, once the pride of some long-dead family sits silent and neglected; rotting trash and leaves line its overgrown hedges.

Lawman sidles-up beside his friend and whispers solemnly. "My papa heard tell...the man who lived there went crazy." An icy- cold tingle travels down Willy's back. "He beat his woman ta death, drown'd their baby in a whiskey barrel then hung hisself."

Willy feels dizzy. "Why? Why'd he do it Lawman?"

The other boy shrugs. " My mama said it was God's punishment cuz they was livin' in sin." His voice drops once more. "When a neighbor found him...his face were black as pitch n' covered with maggots."

Willy fears the four cupcakes, three cups of punch, and two donuts from the Halloween party will be making their reappearance if he doesn't get away from this spot."I gotta go! " He chokes and stumbles away down the sidewalk.

Lawman hurries alongside him. "You's gonna puke?"

"Maybe," Willy says truthfully, though he feels better now that he's moving again.

Lawman chuckles; he's proud of his story and plans on re-telling it to his brothers during their nightly chores. He grabs Willy's shoulder forcing the other boy to stop. "So... we gotta deal?"

"I don' know...where you gonna be?"

"Right outside the door. Iffen a spook tries to drag you down to Hell, I'll send him back to the Lake of Fire!"

Willy's eyes widen. "How?"

"The Good Book, dumb dumb! I'll mak' shure and have it with me!"

"Which 'Good Book'?'"

Willy is always on the lookout for a good read; he wonders if he'll be able to find this one in the village library.

Lawman rolls his eyes. "Seriously? Don' you go ta church? The Good Book! The Holy Bible, numb nuts!"

"Oh," Willy says, disappointed, " that good book...we go ta church...sometimes."

Lawman is suddenly serious. "Have you been baptized?"

Willy squints, trying to remember. "I don' rightly recall."

Lawson whistles. "Boy! You go into an unholy house without the power o' Jesus Christ n' all his disciples...you mayn't make it out alive!"

Willy looks over his shoulder at the Murder House; shadowy under its canopy of trees. "You go with me then! You bring yur bible inside! It'll protect us both!"

Lawman curses the success of his own argument; his prank is rapidly going sideways. "Nah! You don' git it! I gotta be a little bit aways, so I ken spread the holy protection 'round the whole place!"

The boys have reached the part where their paths diverge; Willy continues left, Lawman right. The bigger boy tries one last time to close the deal. "How 'bout this...iffen you do it...I'll give you yur choice of any of my candy bars!"

Willy is shocked. Lawman's large and still growing family means his friend is always hungry; the boy has been obsessing about trick or treats for months. "Well...I don't know."

"Come on! Then we ken tell everybody how brave we was!"

This is a more appealing thought to young Willy, but still... "What'd about yur knife?"

Lawman's eyes narrow. "My knife? You mean ma Stuckey's knife?"

"Yeah, the one with the jewels on the handle and the little holder."

Willy has coveted that knife since the first time Lawman waved it in his face, bragging how he'd bought it out of a Stuckey's vending machine.

Lawman's face darkens; his knife is one of his most prized possessions, he keeps it with him at all times. "That's not fair!"

Now it's Willy's turn to press his advantage. "Take it... or leave it."

Lawman is surprised at the other boy's steely resolve; Willy has always been such a pushover.

"Fiiiine!" He drawls. "Iffen you ken stay by yourself fur five whole minutes, I'll give you my... " the boy sighs with regret," knife."

"And it's holder?"

"And it's holder...spit on it?"

The boys spit onto their palms and shake.

"Okay," Lawson says, wiping his palm on his jeans. "That's a promise! I gotta take the little uns out first, then I'll meet you here!"

"Okay," Willy agrees. "See you here at seven o' clock, sharp."

"Fine!" Lawson says, and walks away, swinging his lunch pail. "See you then!"

Puffing, Willy runs toward his rendezvous point.

The mill clock chimed the hour minutes ago and Willy worries Lawman might welch on his promise if he's late. Out of the darkness, a hand grabs Willy's Dracula cape. Squeaking with fright, he nearly topples backwards.

"Shhh! Stupid! It's me!"

Lawman steps out from behind a tree grinning; his charcoal beard is darker than it was for the party, and a bandana tied to a stick has been added to his ensemble.

Willy smacks his friend in relief and grins. "Whatcha got in that handkerchief?"

"Jus' some ol' rags," Lawman admits, looking with envy at his friend's boughten Dracula cape and slicked-back hair. "Hey! Didn't I tell you? Dracula ain't supposta have curly hair!"

"So!? Hobos ain't supposta wear jeans!" Will argues back as they reach their first house.

"Sez who?"

"Sez everyone!"

The friends bicker back and forth as they wend their way through the village trick or treating. Lawman is eating every fourth piece of candy he receives but Willy can only sniff at his own sweet smelling stash; he promised his daddy he wouldn't eat one bite until they'd checked it together. "I gotta big ol' Hershey bar! With almonds!" He exclaims with excitement.

"So? I gotta Mr. Goodbar. They's bigger than a Hershey bar!"

"T'ain't!"

"Tis!"

"T'ain't!"

"Jus' ring the bell!"

Time passes and the streets begin to clear. The boys note that half the porch lights they pass are switched-off. Smashed jack o' lanterns are becoming more frequent.

In the distance, Willy spies a group of teenagers soaping car windows. "Big kids are coming-out," he wavers.

Lawman blows a raspberry. "So? I got five brothers bigger'n me! It's probably them!"

Willy clutches his well-filled pillowcase to his chest. "You said they tol' you they was gonna steal our candy!"

Lawman looks over his shoulder at the rowdy teenagers. He'd told Willy this story just to tease him, but, now, as he reflects upon it, such a threat is all too real.

The mill clock sounds; the boys count nine chimes.

"Whoa, we're out late! Come on!" Lawman takes-off running with Willy following close behind.

It doesn't take long before they reach The Murder House.

A fresh smattering of eggs, smashed pumpkins, and unfurled toilet paper shows that tricksters have already paid a visit.

The wind whips through the home's broken panes, creating an eerie, moaning sound.

"You got the bible?"

"Yeah, here in ma bag."

"You got the knife?"

"Yeah, it's here...but to git it, you're gonna have to stay inside all by yurself fur five minutes!"

"We don't have no watch, how'll we know?"

That stumps Lawman until he comes-up with a solution.

"I'll count hippopotamuses...like they teach us in school."

"How many hippopotamuses makes five minutes?"

"I don't know...a million?"

"A million?! I'll be in there a week! One hundred sounds fair."

Lawman is about to argue when the sound of whooping stops him. "Hey! That gangs comin' this way!" He pushes Will through the broken gate and up the brick walkway, slipping and sliding on eggs and pumpkin innards as they run. "This way," he hisses, taking hold of Willy's cape and steering him round the front porch towards the back.

Stumbling through overgrown rose bushes and shrubs, the boys reach the back just in the nick of time; the marauders have reached the front.

The sound of smashing eggs, yells and jeers fill the air.

Sweating through their t-shirts, Willy and Lawman cower against the back wall. Willy clutches at Lawman's hand in warning; someone is coming.

"Hey! Let's torch this garbage dump!"

Willy turns wild eyes to Lawman; they both recognize the voice.

Bobby Hartgrove: son of a mill boss and mean as a snake. Bobby Hartgrove who is following the same path Willy and Lawman took; he'll be rounding the corner any second.

"Bobby!"

The footsteps stop. Willy and Lawman hold their breath.

"What?"

A faint voice is calling from the front. "Stan sez he's gettin' a couple six packs! Sez he'll meet us at the quarry!"

"Fuck yeah!" The teenager grunts.

The footsteps recede.

Willy and Lawson stay frozen in place until the sounds of cursing, slamming car doors, and gunning engines die away.

Finally, the wind rattling through dry seed pods is all they can hear.

"He said the 'F' word!" Willy still can't believe his ears.

"So what!? Big deal! I'm cold...let's git this over with."

Lawman sets his burlap sack on the ground and pulls-out a small, sky-blue book.

"What's dat?"

"Tis a bible...my baby brother got it for bein' baptized."

Willy has never seen such a small bible; the family one which sits in his daddy's room is ten times bigger. "Are you shur it's gonna work? A baby bible like that?"

"Pshaw! Dummy! Tis the words inside, not the size that matters! Let's see iffen we kin git in through the back door."

The boys push their way through shoulder-high weeds, skirting an old cistern and hand pump before reaching their destination. Willy gazes up with relief; the flight of wooden steps have long since rotted away.

"Can't git up!"

"Can! I'll give you a boost!"

Lawman threads his fingers together and Willy places his foot on it. The bigger boy easily lifts his skinny friend up to the level of the narrow threshold and Willy scrambles up. Perching there, five feet off the ground, he half-heartedly tries the knob. To both boy's surprise, it turns and Willy tumbles inside. "Help!" He yelps.

Startled, Lawman falls backwards into a pricker bush. "Owww! Wha's the matter? Did'cha hurt yurself?"

The pale oval of Willy's face peers out."No...it jus' startled me is all."

Now that he's inside, with the whole, black interior of the Murder House pressing against his unprotected back, Willy knows this was a bad idea. "Watch out! I'm coming back down!"

"You can't! We made a spit-promise!"

"You Pentecostals ain't allowed to swear!" Willy's swings his legs over the threshold, but his escape route is blocked by his friend.

"Like fun we can't! You keep yur promise Willy Graham, or I'm gonna tell everyone at school you're a lily-livered-chicken shit!"

Lawson's colorful phrase as well as his threat brings Willy's kicking legs to a standstill. "Yur a bad friend! I'm gonna tell everyone yur real name is Lauren! That's a girl's name!"

"You promised you wouldn't tell no one!"

"So? Yur breakin' a promise too!"

Chest heaving, the boys stare at one another in the moonlight.

"Fine! Jus' step a couple feet in, grab somethin' as proof, and I'll help you back down!"

With the chill of the empty house pressing all around, Willy doubts if he can advance an inch, nevermind a few feet. "I can't move! Can't see a thang!"

"Take Mitch's lantern!"

Lawman hands-up the battery powered lantern his older brother never returned after his short stint in the Scouts.

Willy takes it, and swings it experimentally to his side. He's in a small galley kitchen; dirt, wasp nests and all sorts of detritus cover the floor. "It's a kitchen," he calls down.

"So! Git a pan or somethin'! No! Wait! See iffen there's some wall paper you ken grab!"

Willy lifts the lantern; it's dim, yellow light makes the blackness of the surrounding house somehow darker. "Don't see no wallpaper!"

Lawman's eye roll can be seen even from Willy's poor vantage point. "Not in a kitchen, numb nuts! Go in a'ways!"

Willy pauses, takes a deep breath, then peers into the well of darkness before him. *What iffen the noose is still here?*

Lawman's voice makes him jump. "Why're you jus' standing there? Go!"

Willy slowly slides his foot along the gritty floor, holding-out the lantern as far as his skinny arm can reach. The outline of a diminutive hallway comes into view. *Looks kinda like home. I'm gonna pretend this is mama's house when she was a little girl.*

Emboldened by his fantasy, Willy leaves the kitchen and heads down the hallway. The smell of mildew and rot becomes stronger as the child threads his way through chunks of fallen plaster, broken glass, and piles of stinking garbage. He reaches the end of the hall and gasps.

He's in the house's front room.

The room is bright with moonlight, the broken panes shimmer in its silvery- blue light. Blasts of cold air pass through the windows, stirring the leaves, dust, and fast food wrappers. To Willy's right is a mantelpiece; it's beauty scarred by generations of graffiti. A woman's bra and panties are draped over one end; Willy blushes and looks away.

He crosses to the other side, looking for any sign of wallpaper, when something catches his eye.

Up and down a doorjamb, lines have been drawn; the boy immediately recognizes them as growth marks. His own daddy has marked lines like these in every house and trailer they've ever stayed in.

Willy holds the lantern closer and rubs his finger across a faint name: Olivia -13 yrs. *Thirteen*?

Willy looks more closely. The wood is striated with lines. Olivia's start at age two, but there are others as well. The boy counts five children's names in all.

The highest line for Jackson, 16 yrs, is nearly two feet above Will's curly head. "Jackson."

The sound of his own voice startles him. Willy looks around the empty, desecrated room. *This ain't no Murder House! Kids lived here!*

In Willy's mind, the room becomes bright with sunlight. A blue couch appears; a gangly teenage boy sprawls across it. Willy smiles. Near beside him, two small girls are up to "threesies" in their jacks' game. An older girl lounges on a wing backed chair, brushing hair the color of corn silk; she's chatting and laughing into an old fashioned phone.

"Olivia! "The big boy drawls. "Git off the telephone!"

The girl tosses her mane; it's highlights glint and flash in the sunlight.

"Mind yer manners Jackson or I'll tell daddy 'bout the cigarettes I found in the privy!"

Outside, Lawman is pacing. He would have left already if it weren't for the lantern. "Willy! We gotta go!"

Willy starts out of his fantasy; he's back in a garbage strewn room, lit by streaks of moonlight.

Willy caresses the name Olivia one last time and turns to leave when one of his sneakers crunch something. Curious, he stoops to look.

It's three jacks.

Right before Willy's eyes, the jacks begin to spin like tops.

Then his lantern goes out.

The boy takes a gasping breath and straightens.

Standing before him, lined-up from tallest to smallest are four wavering blue figures shimmering and oscillating in the moonlight.

The girl he thinks of as Olivia, holds out her hand. "Hello, Willy!"

The ghost's voice is as sweet and gentle as her smile, and the boy feels comforted in spite of his fear.

"Willy! Come out or I'm leavin' without you!" Lawman sounds panicked.

Olivia and the tall boy exchange an amused look and laugh; the younger girls smile and giggle.

"Your friend is scared," Olivia observes. "Most people can't see us...but you... you can...you're special, aren't you?"

Willy shakes his head, confused. "I...I..." He finds it hard to form words.

The girl smiles and nods. "Doesn't matter honey...you're here now...and we need to ask you something...we need to ask you to help us."

Willy clutches the lantern. "Me?" He squeaks and the ghost children all laugh, but not unkindly.

"Yes... you. You see...we need to send our sister a message."

"Your..." Willy frowns and scans the line of transparent figures. *Four...that's not right...there should be...*

"Five, " the tall boy answers, and the hair on Willy's nape stands on end. "That's right Willy, our sister isn't here with us. She's somewhere else...somewhere we can't get to her. That's why

we need your help. Will you help us Willy? Help us find our sister?"

Willy swallows and nods.

An audible sigh passes through the room, and for a moment, Willy feels the ghosts' joy and relief as though it were his own. The phantoms hug one another before turning bright, happy faces towards the living boy.

"Thank you Willy Graham...thank you." All four voices murmur.

Willy smiles back. "But whadaya want me ta do?"

The ghost children become somber once more.

"We need you to find her," Olivia says. " Find her... and tell her...tell her these exact words...' it wasn't your fault.'"

"'It wasn't your fault?" Willy repeats woodenly, his mind racing with the implications from this statement.

Jackson shakes his head. "It wasn't your fault...tell her that Willy...tell her when you find her. Her name is..."

"Maisie," Willy whispers.

"Maisie," all four ghost children nod and whisper back. "Maisie Laverty."

The two smallest girls disappear.

"Maisie...Laverty," Willy repeats slowly and carefully.

"Don't forget?" Olivia's shape is already fading. "Don't forget?"

"I won't," Willy says. "Maisie Laverty...'it wasn't your fault.'"

Willy is alone.

Later that night, as Willy pours his candy across the newspapers his daddy has laid upon a table, he explains his tardiness.

"These big boys chased us all the way past the mill, daddy, " the child says, gloating over the riches spread before him.

"Humph...that's All Hallows Eve...tricks as well as the treats...jus' be shur to bring Lawman back his lantern...I'm certain his brother's beaten the tar outta him for takin' it without leave."

Willy giggles and Frank shakes his head disapprovingly. "He shouldn't have abandoned you in the woods like he did, but still...he's your friend and you shouldn't take sport in his trouble."

Willy wipes the smile off his face and pretends to look apologetic. "Yes, daddy...ken I have some candy now?"

Frank smiles. "Yup...it all looks good ta me...are you gonna share some of this with yur old man?"

Willy smiles and nods. " And ken we watch a monster movie?"

Frank chuckles and helps his son refill his pillow case. "Shur...since it's not a school night...let's go see what's on."

"Thanks daddy! I'll meet you out there; I jus' wanna get some egg cartons to organize my candy."

Frank laughs again and goes out to the living room.

As soon as the swinging door shuts, Willy runs to the telephone table and pulls the phonebook from its drawer. Keeping one eye on the kitchen door, he flips to the white pages, finds the "L's', and runs his finger down the line of names.

"Larkin... Larrimore... Larurn... Lacella..." The boy turns the page and his eyes widen. "Laverty!" He squeaks, and leans-in closer. "M. Laverty... Maisie Laverty," he whispers in awe.

It's real...it really happened.

Willy crams the book back into the drawer, grabs his bag of candy and finds his father already watching a black and white movie. " How 'bout 'The Mummy'? It's already half over... do you mind?"

Willy jumps up on the couch beside his daddy and sets the pillow case beside him. "I don' mind!" He chirps, and it's true.

He's safe and snug in his own warm house, watching a spooky movie with his daddy and a whole sack load of candy. But best of all, he's got a secret. A wonderful, exciting secret which makes him feel grown-up, brave, and special.

Frank smiles down at his son, pulls him to his side and hugs him tight. Willy nestles against his daddy and smiles back up at him. "I don't mind at all!"

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